

Bertoli, Mariacristina Natalia. “Review of *Ezra Pound, Language and Persona*. Ed. Massimo Bacigalupo and William Pratt. Genoa, Italy: Università degli Studi di Genova, 2008.” *Paideuma* 36 (2007-2009): 235-38.

This volume definitely deserves a place on the shelf of all Poundians. *Ezra Pound, Language and Persona* is noteworthy for its scholarship as well as for its tributes to Pound by contemporary poets Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Kevin Kiely, Robert Rehder and Richard Romer (pp. 335-69). The icing on the cake is the third and last section of the book, Massimo Bacigalupo’s “Tigullio Itineraries: Ezra Pound and Friends” (pp. 371-447): seven exciting walks through Rapallo and environs guiding literary pilgrims to the Ligurian world of the poet and his circle (Yeats, Hemingway, etc.). Yet, the actual pilgrimage in *Ezra Pound, Language and Persona* is the search for Ez’s authentic voice as disguised by his many personae and heteroclit languages, thus offering fresh views of these long-debated aspects of Pound’s poetics.

These two aspects of Pound’s poetry are mapped in Part I (“Personae”) and Part II (“Languages”), totaling nineteen papers. As Massimo Bacigalupo claims in the “Introduction: Persona vs. the Personal,” Pound chose personae that resemble him, and much of his best known verse is spoken in the first-person.

Romolo Rossi, a psychiatrist who attended Pound in the 1960s, concludes provocatively that Pound had a bipolar personality, thus prompting that the personae speaking in his poems may be viewed as the literary counterpart of his split personality. Likewise adopting a psychoanalytic perspective, Helen M. Dennis underscores the role played by memory in the construction of the masks the reader encounters in the *Pisan Cantos*. According to Dennis, the fragmentation of the poet’s voice into different fictitious selves enacts his loss of selfhood and, while doing so, recreates its original unity. A similar interpretation of *The Cantos* is offered by Robert Rehder, who views the poet’s various personae as metaphors of a fragmented self he endeavors to mend in poetry. Taking a symbolic turn, Caterina Ricciardi focuses on the “small boy” mask of canto 74, and – by detecting its debt to James’s *A Small Boy and Others* and to Pound’s own *Indiscretions*, as well as to Hawthorne’s “The Custom-House” – interprets it as an expression of the *topos* of mankind’s loss of primordial bliss (equivalent to spiritual unity), epitomized by the religious archetype of the uncorrupted garden.

Given Pound’s interest in other cultures, his models often poach on exotic territories. It is well known that Pound was fascinated by the Noh theatre, where the

epiphany of a ghost disguised as a human being is a distinctive (as well as ubiquitous) motif. Pound refashioned this theme in compliance with his own poetics by adding – as is the case of the play *Tristan*, in which the ghost of the medieval hero speaks through the Sculptor's voice – the idea of possession, which stands for the poet's inspiration (Akitoshi Nagahata). The epiphany – which is tightly linked to the Neoplatonic concept of illumination enabling humans to glimpse the world of transcendental ideas – is further developed by Pound in his translation of Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, especially in the final scene of Herakles' death on the pyre, when the hero attains the ultimate insight into human condition. "Pound re-used the image of Herakles' splendour in canto 116 in a moment of despairing self-evaluation of his lifetime's work," writes Peter Liebrechts. "This passage from canto 116 may be read as a very painful admission by Pound that he is not Herakles, and that his lifelong search for enlightenment and release would still end in a 'dark night of the soul'" (312).

Analogously, in the poems "De Ægypto" and "The Tomb at Akr Çaar" Pound uses the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* to construct a god-like persona, amplifying his claims to truths inspired by a glimpse of the afterlife (Gerd Schmidt). These poems are not the only ones in which Pound wears a mask with a view of shaping his voice and identity as poet, for in cantos 74 and 77 he speaks with the voice of the African Gassire, singing his dirge *Hooo Fasa*. The fact that Pound here muffles his voice through Gassire – the legendary forefather of a West African caste of poet-pariahs known as "griots," who is given the sorrowful gift of poetry in retaliation for the sacrifice of his sons for the sake of glory – reveals his identification with this character's sin. This identification may be regarded as an acknowledgement that poetry and politics should not mix; thus, the lesson which had taken Gassire so long to learn, was painfully learnt by Pound as well (Michael Faherty).

The variety of Pound's voices is also associated with his miscellaneous language. Fabian Ironside highlights the massive presence of dialect in Pound's writing, and ascribes it to the American tradition of subversive vernacular humor flourishing in the Jacksonian period and reaching its heyday with James Russell Lowell's *The Biglow Papers*. Through Lowell's dissident voice, Pound advocates Yankee libertarianism as embedded in "a democratic language which eschews ambiguity" (167). By contrast, diametrically different political instances are conveyed whenever the poet mingles English with Italian. His archaic literary vocabulary spangled with regional words, as

well as his religious language interspersed with scatological expressions (cantos 72 and 73), are his poetic response to Fascist rhetoric (Stefano Casella).

Language, then, can be regarded as a vehicle for the construction of the poet's identity through political instances. Yet, it can also be viewed as a configuration of words which – like tesserae in a mosaic – have the power to summon images in the reader's mind. Language can therefore be analyzed as the means through which Pound actualized his Imagist aesthetics, which accounts for the poet's fascination with the *Greek Anthology* – the epigrammatic style closely associated with tangible objects and, in consequence, with shapes and images (H. K. Riikonen). For Pound, language is intrinsically endowed with plastic qualities depicting reality's imperceptible process of change, whose "infrathinness" can only be represented through a "temporal mapping of relationships of identity and differentiation through time" (Ellen Keck Stauder: 262). It is precisely thanks to this mapping that identity pierces through language as something – to put it in Virginia Woolf's words – of "rainbow-like intangibility" rather than of "granite-like solidity." Images play a prominent role not only in Pound's aesthetics, but also in his struggle to assert his identity, for they are partial (and therefore, metonymical) realities embedded in the poetic text. Thus, as John Gery maintains, Pound's detailed language is not simply meant to *depersonalize* the poet's experiences, but to *universalize* his struggle for identity by transfiguring it into a metonymy of each human being's efforts to acquire self-awareness.

A major point emerging from *Ezra Pound, Language and Persona* is that Pound's personae and his real self are inextricably intertwined. In effect, if on the one hand Pound's recollections are extensively mirrored in his production, on the other, at difficult moments, poetry was for him a means for imaginatively shaping his own life and self (Walter Baumann). Like the personae of his writings, the multifaceted aspects of Ezra Pound's personality – kept tightly fastened to each other by the *fil rouge* of his fluid identity – manifest themselves in masks like Hemingway's friend and mentor (Sam S. Baskett) or the "cultural administrator" to Fascism (Catherine Paul). Pound's literary and biographical façades have in turn been changed into second-degree masks by such authors as the Finnish Tuomas Anhava e Pentti Saarikoski, who – in their translations of Pound's poetry – had to create a double set of personae for the poet and his masks (Janna Kantola).

As in a play of mirrors, the reader of Pound cannot help questioning *his own* identity and voice. The essays collected in *Ezra Pound, Language and Persona* are

significant responses to the stimuli offered by Pound's work, and are not only interesting in themselves, but also a spur to further investigation into the construction of identity both in Pound's poetry and, more generally, in modern literature. For, in the end, the issue underlying this collection is of general literary relevance: how to construct identity through communication and language.